

I must be over 200 mile south and east of the Shortgrass Country as this report is being written. The brush is so thick here that distances have to be estimated. Crow navigation would be of no value, because the birds down here in South Texas get so cross-eyed looking for a landing field that they couldn't measure their nest, much less lay out a flight pattern. Buzzards are so used to doing a closed-wing, feather-footed landing that they can't set down on an open runway. I saw an old blackhead this morning miss a road 50 feet. I got tired of watching after he'd over shot the field three times.

One of my compadres lured me into this cow jungle. He promised that he'd host a tour on which I'd see thousands of crossbred cattle. His letter made it sound as if we'd be getting a dashboard view, from an air-conditioned car, of half the southern cow country. As it's turned out, we've been branding bull calves and watching an uncountable amount of striped tail cattle depart through the brush. Thus far, the biggest luxury has been to put out the branding fire and saddle up under the shade of his barn.

I have learned that the local ranchers bemoan the passing of the cowboy more than we do back home. However, if they'd take the trouble to rework their pastures, they could probably locate enough riders hung up in the white brush, or gaffed by thorns, to work the coastal plains. Remnant cattle are gathered by helicopters on a few of these ranches. For a slight amount more money, the pilots could gather the missing cowhands, too.

Lounge chairs and beds don't ever wear out on these cow outfits. My host has been allowing five hours a night for the saddle blankets to dry out. His bedrooms and front porch are going to last a long time. The rocking chairs that his grandpa left him still haven't got the paint worn off the rockers. Pillows and mattresses are going to be passed on for generations. I'd been here three nights before I got my pillowslip wrinkled. One old pony of his has lost so much sleep this summer that his eyes are bugged like a hoot owl's.

Late yesterday evening we did have a picnic. After we'd worked cattle until dark, my partner put five hot cans of beer in a wet sack so we could relax while he checked a pump jack.

Dusk in South Texas is a perfect setting for an outing. Seventy or 80 head of yearling heifers were standing back in the brush, watching us as close as a lion tamer checks the popper on his whip. By climbing to the last rung of the ladder, I could catch a glimpse of an airport beacon. On the ground, when the wind would lay, the brush would part enough to make the stars visible.

I was hoping to hear a coyote howl, but they get so smart in the brushlands that they save their howling until they get lost from their dens.

It'd a take a mighty demanding guest to ask for any better entertainment than getting to drink sack chilled beer to the tune of a popping gasoline engine.

Rattlesnakes in the southlands thrive as well as the shrubbery. Cowboys told me that last year on this ranch they killed one so long that he could be draped over a pickup bed without his head or his rattlers leaving the ground. I found out later on that they were exaggerating the snake's length. One of the Mexican hands confessed that if the tires hadn't been low on the truck, the snake wouldn't have reached much past the hubcaps.

Brush popping around the people's ears gives them a wild imagination. You have to excuse a fellow for dreaming up snake stories when the only amusement he has is the sound of thorns tearing against leather. But as far as that goes I've known a few open-land Shortgrassers who were windy as a blacksmith's bellows, when it came to telling rattlesnake stories.

The work schedule here it too tight to tell you everything that's been happening to me. If the brush doesn't grow over the roadways, I'm going to pull out tomorrow. I don't suppose a man ever should complain as long as he's got cow people for company and a chance to spend four or five hours a night in bed.